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TERRORISM HEARINGS SIGNAL STAT CRACKDOWN

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The new Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism (SST) held its premier on Capitol Hill April 24 and, despite the bizarre antics of the cast, showed it has the potential to play a deadly serious part in any future crackdown on domestic protest.

The committee's day-long hearings—the SST's first except for a brief examination of the FBI budget earlier in the year—introduced a new vocabulary of political repression to replace the 30-year-old language of McCarthyism. The code words are no longer "subversive," "card-carrying Communist" and "fellow traveler"; today they are "terrorism" and "disinformation."

The SST is under the chairmanship of Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R-Ala.), a former admiral and 8-year prisoner of war in Vietnam. During the hearings, Denton repeatedly interrupted witnesses with rambling monologues on his experiences as a POW, the evils of communism and the naivete of the U.S. press. At one point, he started to unbutton his shirt to demonstrate that he was unafraid of the "terrorists" and was not wearing a bulletproof vest.

When Denton faltered, four witnesses were offered to take up the slack: former CIA director William Colby; Claire Sterling, author of "The Terror Network," a sensationalist book accusing the Soviet Union of responsibility for terrorism worldwide; Michael Ledeen of the hawkish Center for Strategic and International Studies; and Arnaud de Borchgrave, coauthor of the right-wing novel "The Spike" and key proponent of the idea that Moscow seeks decisive influence over Western media through so-called "disinformation" techniques.

The hearings' appointed task was to broadcast the theme that terrorism represents an "insidious" threat to the U.S. and that if steps are not taken the nation can expect to be inundated by an army of assassins, bomb throwers and hijackers.

The main point, however, hammered home repeatedly throughout the day, was to tag Moscow with the onus of, in Sterling's words, "funding, training and protecting and sheltering" an international network of "terrorist" groups such as the Irish Republican Army and the Italian Red Brigades.

Even more ominously, the committee sought to tie terrorism to a Soviet "disinformation" campaign aimed at planting the Moscow line in the "story-hungry and sometimes gullible" Western press.

The disinformation theme also inspired the hearings' most pointed accusation—De Borchgrave's charge that the Soviets are "playing a covert role in promoting the antinuclear lobby" as part of a "strategy of control of the Western world's oil supplies." De Borchgrave claimed that the Moscow connection may explain the political stance of a leading antinuclear umbrella group, the Mobilization for Survival (MfS), linking nuclear power protest with "unilateral disarmament advocates, new left activists and some ecologists."

Amid all the conspiracy-mongering, Colby sounded like the voice of moderation when he asserted that the Soviets have no "central war room with flashing lights" for controlling terrorists and that "they are not directly directing the orchestra." Moscow's responsibility, the former intelligence chief said, lies in providing training and equipment to groups he considers terrorist.

Perhaps the most important political point of the day—preparing a justification for stepped up harassment, surveillance and infiltration of law-abiding protest groups and international support organizations—was revealed when Denton read a statement prepared by Sen. John East (R-N.C.) for Sterling's response: "Many of these support activities that are necessary to successful terrorism are in fact legal and nonviolent . . . yet it would seem that in order to track terrorism adequately and for an intelligence or law enforcement agency to predict the occurrence of terrorism, it would have to have some surveillance of legal and nonviolent support."

De Borchgrave drew a similar conclusion when he criticized FBI rules restricting investigation of such groups. They make it difficult, he complained, "to monitor the very groups and individuals that the KGB (the Soviet intelligence agency) hopes to manipulate or recruit."

In response to De Borchgrave's testimony, the Philadelphia-based MfS issued a statement saying, "Any innuendo that MfS is dominated by external forces, or that we are in any way associated with terrorist organizations is total fabrication." The statement accused the witness of using "guilt by association tactics . . . reminiscent of the repression and intimidation of the McCarthy period."

The committee is "laying the groundwork of justification for labeling dissent groups as disloyalty groups," charged Lorraine Petti of the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation (NCARL). Petti asserts that hardliners like De Borchgrave use the disinformation concept to tie groups to Moscow even when there are no lines of direct communication. From this standpoint, all a group need do is put forward a line parallel to the Soviet's to become objectively a Moscow agent and presumably a suitable target for investigation. According to this logic, groups opposing a U.S. military buildup, for example, are guilty of contributing to a Soviet disinformation campaign.

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